

French influence in Central European painting around 1900

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Since the Enlightenment, French culture has been a continuous source of inspiration and a stimulus for modernization for most of the nations of Central and East-Central Europe.¹ All the nations of the Habsburg Empire (from 1867 the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Dual Monarchy) were continuously influenced by different aspects of French culture and art, such as Rousseauism, French Romanticism, Positivism, French Naturalism and Symbolism.²

This paper will focus first and foremost on painting between the late 1880s and about 1902, when Modernism became accepted in the region. Sculpture will also briefly be mentioned, since it played an exceptionally important role in supporting artistic experiments in Bohemia. I will be speaking about Czech, Polish and Hungarian painting, but not Austrian (Viennese) painting, although the role of Vienna was in many aspects that of a vital transmitter of artistic influences, including those of several French masters. However, in this period Vienna acted on the other art centres of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a 'negative catalyst', one that, precisely because of its great and idiosyncratic artistic achievements, challenged the 'others' to create a very different artistic identity, as well as a different style and different aesthetic ideals within Modernism.³ Although certain painterly

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¹ See: Lonnie Johnson: *Central Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

² There are several studies on the influence of all these intellectual and artistic trends in the individual countries, but there is no comprehensive work which sums up these separate national cultural trends into one comparative tableau, either in literature or in other disciplines. A pioneering study focusing on the fine arts at the turn of the century is: Jacek Purchla, Piotr Krakowski (eds), *Art around 1900 in Central Europe* (Cracow: 1999).

³ See: Ilona Sármany-Parsons, 'The fine arts in the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War', in *ibid.*, 17–27.

techniques (e.g. Pointillism) were rapidly absorbed by the leading painters of the Vienna Secession, they soon crystallized an individual style that was very different from those of their French contemporaries. Thus – in a curious way – the French influence was only latently present in Vienna, and was indeed only one of a number of inspirations from abroad which had been rapidly absorbed (for example, that of Whistler, of the Belgian Khnopff, of the Dutch Toorop or of the Glasgow Four).⁴

In my article I will group my analysis of the French influence around three issues: firstly the new and increasing possibilities of information (periodicals, reproductions and international exhibitions) at this time; secondly the vital role of artistic education and training; and thirdly the effects of personal contacts.

However, the impact of French influence will not be very meaningful without a brief introductory sketch of the differing local traditions of the three nations we are here concerned with (Czechs, Poles, Hungarians), and some indication of the artistic level and potential of their national art institutions within the Dual Monarchy. These factors may in turn help to explain their artistic preferences with regard to the other national schools of European art in the nineteenth century.

After the political compromise of 1867 the Hungarians enjoyed total cultural autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian Empire; they were now able to improve their institutional system for the arts, and to make all their decisions independent of Vienna. The Czechs and the Poles on the other hand were reliant on the imperial budget, and dependent on the decisions of the Common Ministries. Not surprisingly, official taste was traditional, which at this time in the late 1880s meant that it favoured different versions of Historicism and tried to avoid all issues relating to nationalist or separatist tendencies. In Prague, the Czechs had established from the 1860s (that is, in what is known as the 'age of national revival') Czech institutions that nurtured their own national art. These Czech cultural establishments – first and foremost the Czech National Theatre – were the creation of Czech civil society without state (Imperial Austrian) subvention.

Up to the late eighties there was as yet no intention to create a new national style *par excellence*. All the nations of the Dual Monarchy shared a stylistic *lingua franca*: in architecture it was the Italianate neo-Renaissance, in painting a late Romantic Academicism (history painting), whose outstanding representatives had studied partly in Vienna, and partly in Munich.⁵ From the late sixties the latter was undoubtedly the most important German educational centre for artists coming from the East.

⁴ See: *Secession / The Vienna Secession from Temple of Art to Exhibition Hall* (1997).

⁵ See: Akos Moravánszky, *Die Architektur der Donaumonarchie* (Berlin, 1988); Ilona Sármány-Parsons: 'Die Architektur der Historismus in Wien, Prag und Budapest', in: *Mitteuropa: Idee, Wissenschaft und Kultur im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert* (Vienna: 1996), 145–86.

The Poles, whose country had by that time been divided for more than a hundred years, lived under Prussian, Russian and Austrian rule. Of these three hegemonies, without doubt the Austrian was the most liberal and tolerant, both with regard to governance and cultural issues. The smallest (and financially the poorest) region of historic Poland, together with the historic capital, Cracow, thus became the 'asylum of experimental artists and modernists in the last two decades of the nineteenth century'. (Artists left the regions occupied by the Prussians and Russians and went to live in Cracow.) Polish artistic and intellectual life now flourished in a small provincial town which had as yet escaped industrialization, but which, since the Middle Ages, had been the university city of the nation, and also the stronghold of Polish Catholicism.

The three cities – three national art centres – differed in size, social status and artistic heritage. The latter was vitally important for the visual arts, since it either acted as a permanent source of inspiration, or, on occasion became a negative catalyst for artistic rebellion against its traditions. Prague and Cracow preserved an exceptionally rich architectural heritage from the Middle Ages and the Baroque. The cores of their old cities remained intact until the ancient city walls were pulled down in the second part of the nineteenth century. In effect they were huge open air museums or shrines of national history.

Budapest on the other hand, although it had ancient historic roots, had become a predominantly modern city where industrialization and modernization had created the effect of an immense melting-pot. The generation of Historicism, the protagonists of Budapest's *Gründerzeit*, was determined to create a modern capital and their unshakeable faith in progress and modernization was in accord with the artistic preference for the neo-Renaissance style. Their patriotism was satisfied also by other historic styles associated with the past glory of the nation (as for example was the case with the neo-Gothic Parliament). However, there was no major Academy of Fine Arts for the painters, so they had to go abroad to study, and ninety per cent of them chose Munich. A particular sociological phenomenon in Hungary was that most members of the artistic generation who finished their studies before 1900 came from the country, either from rural Hungary or from tiny provincial towns. Their formative years were spent mainly abroad, and they therefore never developed close emotional ties to the capital. Scenes of modern, metropolitan life are thus missing from their artistic repertoire and their favourite genre was landscape painting with human figures. Matters were very different, however, in Bohemia and in Poland.

The contemporary Czech artists who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, (which was not an important establishment until the reform of 1893) soon developed a passionate love for the old city, with its haunting and picturesque qualities; indeed they established a cult of Prague, making different aspects of the cityscape one of their permanent themes. After

returning from abroad, where they had completed their artistic education, they settled in the capital and took an active part in local cultural politics, which were of course hostile to Austrian influence. A bitter struggle ensued for cultural hegemony in the city; in due course the Prague Germans and the Jews, who had been assimilated into German culture, lost their dominant positions in the city and indeed a German exodus had begun long before political control of the country was lost to the Czechs. The returning Czech artists turned against the aesthetic of the 'generation of the National Theatre', and against Historicism in general, wishing to create an art even in its stylistic aspects distinctively different from that of the Germans. The search was on to find new stylistic forms to articulate their Czech national identity.

In Cracow the Poles had a School of Art, which, though it did not have the official rank of an Academy, was presided over by the grand old man of history-painting, Jan Matejko (1838–1892) and his presence elevated it to the status of an important educational institution.⁶ Most Polish painters also went to Munich to study at the Academy. A national colony was established in Munich centred on the highly successful Polish painter of heroically-depicted military scenes, Josef Brandt, this colony having a strong emotional cohesion, as was typical of Poles living abroad. A Munich type of realism dominated the style of Polish painters who were living there. In Cracow, after Matejko's death, Julian Falat became Director in 1895 and within a short time he reformed the School, turning it into an Academy, introducing the possibility of stylistic pluralism and allowing modern artistic experiments.⁷ For the Poles, Cracow with its University, its ancient Cathedral containing the tombs of the Polish kings, not to mention the burial mound of Koszciusko, was truly a national shrine. Yet the contrast between the city's glorious national history and its current provincialism was a permanent reminder to the artistic intelligentsia of the country's decay.⁸ Cracow was indeed an appropriately memory-laden and symbolic environment for brooding gloomily over the fate of the nation and lamenting the decadent inertia of the present.

The Parisian art scene and its Central European contributors

Before dealing with the most significant contacts with French art and before

⁶ See: Maria Poprzecka, 'Die Frage eines polnischen Akademismus', in Jens Christian Jensen (ed.), *Polnische Malerei von 1830 bis 1914* (Cologne: Dumont, 1978), 63–8.

⁷ It is an interesting parallel, that most art academies in the region were reformed during the 1890s, when a generation of relatively young artists was appointed as professors there, and within two to three years they managed to create a dramatic change in the art world providing a stimulating atmosphere for stylistic experiments. In Vienna this happened not so much in the Academy of Fine Arts as in the 'Kunstgewerbeschule' (School of Applied Arts) where the young artist members of the Secession established a new, modern local style.

⁸ See: Piotr Krakowski, 'The Cracow artistic milieu around 1900', in Jacek Purchla, Piotr Krakowski (eds), *Art Around 1900 in Central Europe*, 71–81.

reconstructing French influence, it is appropriate to recall what actually constituted the French art of the day. It is not easy to trace every aspect of French influence, if only because so many different styles and trends were flourishing in Paris in the late eighties, yet numerous diverse styles can still be labelled as French. In general it can be said that there was no French style as such, but that there were several French versions of Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism, which collectively constituted the dazzling and confusing richness of the art life of Paris. (Impressionism will be mentioned here only to illustrate how little influence it had on Central European artists.)⁹ This pluralism in French painting meant, of course, that orientation within this multiplicity of styles could be extremely confusing and even traumatic for a young artist coming from a much more traditional and hierarchical society, one with a more simply delineated cultural sphere.¹⁰ In such a situation personal contacts among the small national colonies already living in Paris could play a decisive role in influencing the newcomer.

The Polish colony with its strong aristocratic presence still brooding over the tragic fate of the nation, oriented Poles quite differently from the Czech colony, which had a fundamentally middle-class character but was also (in the 1880s) not enthusiastic about the avant-garde. They also preferred the Académie Colarossi to the Académie Julian.¹¹ The most significant figure for the Hungarians in the Paris of the eighties was the successful painter Mihály Munkácsy, who was rich and famous enough to integrate himself into the official art circles of the Salon and high Society.¹² Thus, the young Hungarians looked at first for models among the great official names of Parisian art life, and it was only because the members of the next generation of the avant-garde, the Nabis, were still frequenting the Académie Julian, which was the first stop for Hungarians studying in Paris, that the latter come into contact with alternative art.

As a result of the Compromise of 1867 between the Vienna court and Hungary (at that time the historical territory of the Lands of the Crown of St Stephen included practically all the Carpathian Basin and the territories of present-day Slovakia, Croatia, Transylvania and the Voivodina) the latter gained a certain autonomy within the Empire. Although its political and economic independence was restricted, the country gained complete independence in cultural matters. From 1867 onwards, Hungary developed

⁹ It is remarkable how few contacts young foreign artists could make with the leading personalities of the Impressionist group of painters. From the 1880s onwards, they formed a relatively isolated but exclusive group, who did not frequent the cheap cafés and restaurants where the foreign members of Bohemia met. They were already established, had their own niche within the art market, and lived more withdrawn than earlier groups.

¹⁰ See, for example, John Milner, *The Studios of Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹¹ See: *The Julian Academy Paris 1868–1939*. Catalogue, Shepherd Gallery, New York, 1989.

¹² See: Lajos Vegvari, *Munkacsy Mihaly* (Budapest, 1958).

its system of cultural institutions very rapidly. Budapest, the centre of commerce and industry, also became the focus of cultural activity and the seat of most of the national cultural institutions, all of which moved into monumental new buildings. (As mentioned above, the only thing the Hungarians lacked was an Art Academy where the fine arts could be learned at the highest level. As a result, from the 1860s onwards, painters were sent – very often with state scholarships – to study in Munich at the Academy. Only very rarely did they go to Paris before the late 1880s.)

Although the urban planning of Haussmann in Paris had had a profound influence on the new face of Budapest, as far as architecture was concerned, a specific version of Historicism was decisive in shaping the style of Hungarian cities, and was indeed the hallmark for the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was the Italo-centric version of the neo-Renaissance, typically recalling the vocabulary of the Roman cinquecento and especially the art of Sansovino and Palladio.¹³

Romantic Academicism in monumental painting also remained Munich-oriented: its greatest Hungarian representatives focused on history painting and created their *chefs d'oeuvre* in the 1860s and 1870s.¹⁴ However, the first significant masters who lived for a longer time in France in the 1870s were the realist Mihály Munkácsy and László Paál. While the short-lived László Paál worked with the Barbizon painters, Munkácsy, after studying in Düsseldorf, settled in Paris and became a celebrated master of the realist genre after his first great success in the 1870 Salon.¹⁵ The Parisian dealer, Hans Sedlmeyer, marketed Munkácsy's art so well that he could himself afford to live in a small palace and to have an elegant salon which was frequented by Parisian high society. The purchasers of Munkácsy's pictures, however, were mainly American collectors.¹⁶ From the 1890s, his style (a version of realism painted with heavy brown colours) went out of fashion and he rapidly lost his popularity in France; nevertheless for decades his career was the inspirational model for young Hungarian painters dreaming of world fame.

The real shift from a Munich-centred art education to a Paris-centred one came in the late 1880s. Influential in this shift were the French paintings which were shown at the international art exhibitions in the Munich Glaspalast.¹⁷ In particular the naturalism of Bastien-Lepage became a

¹³ See: Ilona Sármany-Parsons, 'Die Architektur der Historismus in Wien, Prag und Budapest', in *Mitteleuropa: Idee, Wissenschaft und Kultur im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 1996), 145–86.

¹⁴ See: Julia Szabó, *Hungarian Painting in the 19th Century* (Budapest: Corvina, 1988).

¹⁵ See: Géza Perneczky: *Mihály Munkácsy* (Budapest: Corvina, 1976)

¹⁶ See: Christian Huemer, 'Charles Sedelmeyer (1837–1925) Kunst und Spekulation am Kunstmarkt in Paris', in *Belvedere* 1999/2, 4–19.

¹⁷ See: Maria Makela, *The Munich Secession. Art and Artists in Turn-of-the Century Munich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1890).

formative force on those Hungarians who, after 1888, went in the majority to Paris to complete their artistic training.

French influence had two different channels, a direct and an indirect one. The first was the result of study-tours and longer stays in France, the second was the impact of travelling exhibitions of French artists, together with the new richly-illustrated periodicals that were both influential and inspirational. Chronologically the change in the direction of artistic orientation started with exhibitions and journals, and even later, when personal exchanges were already common, the periodicals and the exhibitions remained an important source of knowledge and experience.

The importance of exhibitions with a French presence

According to most sources, such as artists' memoirs and correspondence, the French section of the International Exhibition in the Munich Glaspalast in 1888 was decisive in stimulating experimentation with new styles and techniques. Under the inspiration of the great public and financial success of these Exhibitions, the Munich Art Society organized from 1889 annual exhibitions, regularly inviting foreign, including French, artists to exhibit.¹⁸ Indeed, it prompted a number of artists to continue their studies in Paris. The art events of Munich were regularly discussed in all major daily papers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the popular German art journals (such as *Kunst für Alle*) were widespread all over Central Europe.

The next stage of the expansion of French influence in the Dual Monarchy was the important exhibitions to which certain French artists were invited, like the International Exhibition of 1894 in Vienna¹⁹ and, from 1898 onwards, the exhibitions of the Secession. At the 1894 exhibition, works of Puvis de Chavannes, Eugène Grasset, Albert Besnard, Henri Martin and Rodin were shown. Three years later, the first international Exhibition of the newly-founded Secession invited the same masters, but widened the circle of experimental painters even more. It was, however, not only the greatest names among the Symbolists or Post-Impressionists who played a crucial role in introducing a new modern style or painterly technique; some minor figures were also important. For example Pointillism became a decisive influence in the early Vienna Secession because, beside a few minor pictures by Seurat, dozens of works by Theo van Rhysselberghe were put on show at the famous first exhibition. The latter (comparatively minor) artist became

¹⁸ In the First Annual International exhibition in 1889, French realists who cultivated rural and working-class subjects had great success. See: E. G. Edouard Dantan's, *Potters Workshop*, the sensation of the year; P. A. J. Dagnan Bouveret's *Breton Women at Pardon*, which made its creator famous, as a genuine follower of Bastien-Lepage.

¹⁹ See: Ilona Sármany-Parsons, 'Auftakt zur Moderne. Kritik der Wiener Tagespresse 1894', *Acta Historiae Artium*, Vol. 37 (Budapest, 1994–95), 237–45.

very successful, and sold a large number of pictures. It was not long before Neo-Impressionism became the hallmark of modernity in Viennese painting.²⁰

The frequency of cultural exchange speeded up after 1897 when the individual national art associations (the *Secession* in Vienna, the *Sztuka* in Cracow) were established and even the old Czech *Mánés Association* in Prague began to organize exhibitions in a modern way. The first exhibition where exclusively French artists were presented was held in Budapest in 1901, when the Hungarian National Salon organized a big show of French art in the Mücsarnok. The aim of this exhibition was to give an overall view of contemporary French art. The show had an official character, which meant that all the great names from the *Salon des Champs-Élysées* and the *Société des Beaux-Arts* were represented. These included, on the one hand, Paul Besnard, Edmond Aman Jean, Henri Martin, and, on the other, Carrière, Puvis de Chavannes, Eugène Grasset, Benjamin Constant and others. The stylistic palette was wide-ranging, from Jean-Baptiste Corot and Jules Breton to the minor contemporary Symbolists, but no members of the radically experimental modernists, such as Gauguin or Cézanne, were included. The Budapest public had to wait only a year, however, before being able to see the latest artistic experiments: in the spring of 1903 an immensely important exhibition was organized in the Vienna Secession. The general concept and the selection was much more professional than had previously been the case, owing to the involvement of the art critics Julius Meier-Graefe, Octave Mause and Richard Muther.²¹

This very ambitious concept included works from the historical fore-runners of symbolism, like Velasquez, Constable or Corot, with the aim of legitimizing the stylistic development of Impressionism in the eyes of the cultivated but conservative public. Besides Manet, Monet and Renoir, fashionable eclectic painters such as Albert Besnard were also present and even Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Vuillard, Bonnard and Maurice Denis. A smaller selection from this show went on to Budapest, together with some classics of French Impressionism.

Prague was headed in a different direction at this time. The Czech Art Association *Mánés* was hostile from its inception to the Vienna Secession and ostentatiously tried to provide a counterpoint to the 'decadent aestheticism' of the Viennese artists.²² This politically-based animosity meant that important artistic events in Vienna were belittled or ignored and a conscious attempt was made to adopt different artistic ideals. Nevertheless, from the 1880s, French taste and French art had been the alternative

²⁰ See: Ilona Sármany-Parsons: 'Der Einfluß der französischen Postimpressionismus in Wien und Budapest', in *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Galerie* (1990/ 91), 61–101.

²¹ See: Ludwig Hevesi, 'Manet und seine Schule' and 'Die Nach-Impressionisten' in Hevesi, *Acht Jahre Secession* (Vienna, 1906), 406–17.

²² See: Petr Wittlich, *Prague Fin-de-Siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

aesthetic model to that of German culture and the most promising Czech talents (Alphonse Mucha, Ludek Marold and Viteslaw Masek) went to Paris to study.²³ From the late 1880s, art criticism and *feuilletons* in the Czech Press also kept the Prague public informed about French literature, science and the arts. Large anthologies of modern French poetry were published in 1887 and 1894, in which Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud were well represented. French decadence was in vogue in Bohemia. In the late nineties some of the Czech sculptors (Bohumil Kafka and Josef Maratka) ended up in the studio of Rodin. In 1902 *Mánés* organized a Rodin exhibition in Prague to which the master came in person. It was a great public success.²⁴

The situation in the Polish part of the Empire was quite different, since there was no money and therefore no patronage available in Cracow to organize such an international exhibition. Nonetheless, Polish artists could visit French exhibitions held in the region, had their study tours (occasionally even with official Austrian scholarships) to Paris, and this also stimulated the influence of Rodin on Polish sculpture at this time, as witnessed by the Chopin Monument by Szymanovski.

In Poland from the outset the motivation maintaining national traditions in the face of foreign cultural control was naturally even stronger than with the two other nations, but it flourished in symbiosis with the desire to become a part of international experimental tendencies which – sometimes – called into question the essential value and purposes of traditional themes and conventions. The Poles were faithful to their national themes, but wished to find a totally new way and spirit to express them.²⁵

Experimentalism started in the early nineties in all branches of the arts (this general cultural movement is called Young Poland by native scholars),²⁶ but an art society, an efficient instrument for uniting the young modernists, the *Sztuka*, was formed only in 1897. Their first display was well received in Cracow and from the beginning they were also members of the Vienna Secession and from time to time held large exhibitions there.²⁷

From the 1890s, and following the founding of specialist art journals locally, the many reproductions accompanying reviews helped to spread the knowledge of the work of the French masters. While at the beginning of the nineties it was vital for an artist to travel to France to learn different styles, ten years later even those who never visited Paris could become well-informed about the most fashionable aspects of modern art. This was also

²³ See: Roman Prahel, Lenka Byzdovska, *Freie Richtungen – Die Zeitschrift der Prager Secession und Moderne* (Prague: Verlag Trost, 1993), 21, 23.

²⁴ See: *Tschechische Kunst 1878–1914*. Catalogue (Darmstadt, 1984/85), Vol 1, 60–3.

²⁵ See: Agnieszka Morawinska, 'Polish Symbolism', in *Symbolism in Polish Painting 1890–1914* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1984), 13–34.

²⁶ See: W. Juszczyk, *Malarsztwo polskie: Modernizm* (Warsaw, 1977).

²⁷ See: *Sztuka Kregu Sztuki, Catalogue Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie* (Cracow, 1995).

true of the general public. The change in taste was at first rather slow, but in due course there was acceptance of even the most daring experiments.

After this general summing up, let me turn to the most important transmitters of French taste in Central Europe, the artists themselves, who nevertheless were creative personalities in their own right, and who developed their own unique styles after absorption of what they found most valuable in contemporary art.

Studying in Paris: the Czechs, the Poles, the Hungarians

The first leading Czech artist who became a transmitter of French taste in Prague was Vojtech Hynais (1854–1925).²⁸ Hynais, after receiving a solid artistic education at the Vienna Academy, where Anselm Feuerbach was his teacher, was given a scholarship by the Austrians to complete his education in Paris, where he studied under Paul Baudry and Louis Gérôme. He stayed in the French capital until 1893. His decoration and curtain design for the Czech National Theatre (1888) gained enormous popular success against competition from the local Prague-based painters who at that time still cultivated the dark warm colour-scheme of Makart's palette. The highly sophisticated and unusually pale colour scheme, so different from the brushwork and dark colouring typical of the seventies and eighties in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, symbolized the elegance and grace of French taste, in contrast to German heaviness. Exactly because of this, it established a unanimous preference for French contemporary art. Hynais's Paris studio was a Mecca for Czech artists visiting or studying in Paris between 1889 and 1893, and the artist acted as a conduit for French aesthetics. After he was appointed a Professor at the Prague School of Fine Arts, he continued in this role and was influential over a whole generation.

From the mid 1880s, the individual nationalities began to form loose artistic groupings within the Munich art world. There was soon a cohesive group of Polish artists (Josef Brant and Josef Chelmonski were the leading personalities, both of them cultivating a virtuoso form of realism). Inspired by the World Exhibition of 1889, some Poles moved over to Paris (Olga Boznanska) and in 1891 the two most gifted students of Jan Matejko, Josef Mehoffer and Stanislaw Wyspianski, obtained scholarships in Cracow and joined the Polish Bohemia of the French capital. Although an official 'Verein' (Association) was not created there, the common awareness of the country's tragic past united these Polish artists both intellectually and artistically. The Czechs were also going through a 'national awakening', as they fought to overcome the long-dominant German influence in Bohemian culture. In

²⁸ See: *Die Tschechische Kunst 1878–1914. Auf dem Wege in die Moderne* (Darmstadt, 1984/85), 88–91.

Munich they formed the Society of Karel Skreta, named after Bohemia's greatest Baroque painter. The most prominent of its members were Alphonse Mucha (1860–1938), Ludek Marold (1865–1898), Victor Olivka and Viteslav Masek (1865–1927). All of them landed up in Paris in 1888 or 1889, where they spent long years studying and trying to earn their living, mainly by illustrating books and journals. They became excellent illustrators, establishing a strong tradition of graphic art, etching and lithography in Bohemia after returning home in the early nineties. Unlike that of the Poles and the Hungarians, Czech modern graphic art played a more important role in the nineties than oil painting, and has remained ever since one of the most vital and sophisticated branches of Czech fine art.

It was only Mucha who became an international star of Art Nouveau, but even he had to wait seven years after settling in Paris before getting his first commission to do a poster for Sarah Bernhardt depicting her as Gismonde, the title role of the play by Victorien Sardou. The poster was an instant success; because the divine Sarah greatly admired it, she made the Czech artist her 'court painter'. The result was that all the art world, as well as the general public, became aware of the new graphic style. Mucha was then overwhelmed with commercial commissions and exploited the features of his style in his posters eventually to the point of mannerism and exhaustion. Nevertheless, his powerful presence on the Paris scene (until 1907) greatly assisted other Czech artists to find their feet there and made some of the French critics and intellectuals aware of the Czech issue.

The other three Czech illustrators returned to Prague much earlier. Ludek Marold, a virtuoso draughtsman, introduced a new dimension to Czech illustration, under the influence of Chéret, but died young in 1898. Olivka and Masek became professors and taught the new generation of the 1890s, promoting further variations on French style and contributing strongly to the general French orientation in the arts.

The other absolutely decisive French influence was that of Rodin, celebrated in a 1902 exhibition organized by the *Mánes*. What was the explanation for this unique event? As already mentioned, from the late 1880s, the art criticism and *feuilletons* of the Czech press also kept the Prague public informed about French literature, science and the arts. Nevertheless, for the special cult of sculpture, an additional cultural inclination was decisive in Prague.²⁹

The artistic heritage of Bohemia and especially that of Prague was extremely rich in Gothic and Baroque statues, something which helped to orientate young artists more towards sculpture than was the case elsewhere

²⁹ On Czech sculpture, see: Petr Wittlich, 'Plastik', in: Ferdinand Seibt (ed.), *Bohmen im 19. Jahrhundert. vom Klassizismus zur Moderne* (Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, 1995), 273–94.

in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although the plastic arts are a much more prestigious and public undertaking than painting and graphics, it is also more difficult to make a living from them. Nevertheless the unique local tradition (one thinks of the spellbinding statues of the Charles Bridge) inspired many a young Bohemian artist to embark on this comparatively risky career. Official Prague responded with some generosity – the plastic decoration of Bohemian art nouveau is the richest in the region and enabled many sculptors to earn a living. The cynosure of modern sculpture was naturally Rodin, the benchmark for quality in the eyes of Czech art critics. The specialist art journal of the modernists, *Volně smery*, had dedicated two whole issues to his work, even before his big exhibition of 1902. The leading modern Czech sculptor, Stanislav Sucharda, himself an innovator of art nouveau monumentalism, also wrote a passionately enthusiastic article on Rodin's art. Consequently the exhibition was a great public success, but more because of its symbolic political value than because of the aesthetic appeal of Rodin's work for the general public.³⁰ Nonetheless, it had an enormous impact on the cultural prestige of artistic life in Prague: it legitimized the rights of experimental art in the eyes of Prague society and prepared the way for the acceptance of Modernism in Bohemia. The influence of Rodin was of course most marked on Czech sculpture, which achieved extremely high standards. The sculptors Stanislav Sucharda, Ladislav Saloun and Josef Maratka exhibited together at the sixteenth *Mánes Union* show at the end of 1904, while another leading sculptor under Rodin's influence was Bohumil Kafka.

The Polish way of absorbing French influences in the Fine Arts

There had always been important Polish painters who had chosen to live in Paris for long periods or permanently. The Polish community in Paris was highly cultivated, not only because it consisted largely of the great aristocratic families and patrons of the arts, but also because the leading creative Polish artists of Romanticism (for example Chopin and Mickiewicz) were an integral part of the Parisian cultural élite.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, nearly all important Polish painters lived and studied in France for a while, mainly after learning the basics of painting at the Munich Academy. Most of them were from the gentry or of noble origin and mixed in high society, their artistic orientation being towards the painters of the Academy and the Salon. Of the older generation of realist painters Josef Chelmonski (1849–1914) lived in Paris

³⁰ The Czechs saw in the exhibition a sign that Prague as an artistic centre of the Empire was strong enough to rival Vienna. The political and cultural anti-Austrianness saw a symbol of the Czech political alliance with the French against German dominance in the Rodin exhibition.

between 1875 and 1887 and thanks to the astute marketing of the art dealer Adolphe Goupil made a brilliant career with his astonishingly virtuoso pictures of horses, typically studies of a 'Four in Hand'. His home was a meeting point for artists from all parts of Poland, as was the more modest studio of the gifted painter, Anna Bilinska Bohdanowicz (1857–1893), who, after studying under Robert Fleury at the Académie Julian from 1882, lived in Paris for ten years until she married and returned to Warsaw.³¹

The third Polish painter of great talent was again a woman, Olga Boznanska (1865–1940), whose atelier became a centre of Polish cultural life in Paris.³² She received her initial instruction in painting from her mother who had come to Poland as a French governess. She studied from 1886 in Munich and very soon developed her unique individual style reminiscent of the art of Whistler, but nonetheless authentically individual. Her soft, muted tones and washed colour schemes were distinctive enough to arouse the interest of the critics early on, and earned her a number of international awards and gold medals in the nineties (1893 in Munich, 1894 in Vienna). She visited her native town of Cracow regularly and owned a studio there, but refused the Chair of Painting at the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts in 1895. (Had she accepted, she would have been the first woman in such a position in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.) Nevertheless, even after she had finally settled in Paris in 1898, she remained in contact with Polish art life, as well as being totally integrated into the art life of Paris. From 1896, and for thirty-one years, she participated in all the Salons of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and became a member of the Society in 1904. She was always a generous hostess, friend and advisor for young Polish artists visiting Paris. Her work lacks any narrative element, but is powerfully atmospheric and lyrical.³³

The list of Polish painters who studied in Paris for a while is nearly identical with the list of Polish painters identified with Polish Modernism, a phrase covering diverse styles at the turn of the century, including Art Nouveau, Symbolism and an early form of Expressionism.³⁴ Because of the limited scope of this study I will focus on just two of them, Wladyslaw

³¹ See: Cathrine Fehrer, *The Julian Academy, Paris, 1868–1939: Spring Exhibition 1989*, Sheperd Gallery (New York, 1989); Agnieszka Morawinska, 'Polish women artists', in: *Voices of Freedom: Polish Women Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1880–1990*. Catalogue. The National Museum of Women in the Arts. Washington, D.C, 1991, 13–25; *Overcoming All Obstacles: The Women of the Académie Julian*. Catalogue. Dalesh Museum (New York, 2000).

³² See: H. Blum: *Olga Boznanska* (Warsaw: 1974).

³³ See: *Impressionismus und Symbolismus – Malerei der Jahrhundertwende aus Polen*. Exhibition Catalogue (Baden-Baden, 1997/98), 146–50.

³⁴ This very early expressionistic tendency came not so much via Paris, but much more via Berlin where important members studied. One of the future charismatic intellectual leaders of Cracow Bohemia, Stanislaw Przybyszewski, was a close friend of Edward Munch and established contacts between him and young Polish painters.

Slewinski (1854–1918) and Stanislaw Wyspianski (1869–1907), the latter being the greatest artistic personality of the Polish artistic scene at the turn of the century.

Slewinski came from a rich landowning family and went to Paris in 1888 to study at the Académie Julian, then for two years at the Académie Colarossi; but only the cathartic experience of meeting Gauguin in person and seeing his art at first hand made him decide at the age of thirty-five to take up painting seriously and to accept what the Gauguin circle at Pont-Aven called 'Synthetism'. He presented his first works in the Salon des Indépendants in 1897, when he was already forty-three. After seventeen years of absence he returned to Poland in 1905 with his rich Russian wife, Jelizawieta Kruglikova (also a painter). However, by 1910 he was back in France and settled in a small fishing village in Brittany, where he painted until the end of his days. He had a close relationship with Gauguin, who influenced his style, but his Polish noble background determined a different selection of motifs, typically deserted sea-shores and mysterious still-lives, all painted in sombre colours.³⁵

Stanislaw Wyspianski (1869–1907) was the central figure of *fin de siècle* Cracow and a multi-talented artist, making his mark as painter, poet, dramatist and theatrical innovator. A disciple of Matejko, he was imbued with the struggle to come to terms with the tragic Polish past, but turned against Matejko's Historicism and created new, disturbingly modern symbols and images, his work being filled with irony, ambiguity and despair. His stay in Paris between May of 1891 and Autumn of 1894, where he studied at the Académie Colarossi, raises a lot of unanswered questions: for example, although his versatile talents began to blossom in Paris, his style cannot be said to be influenced by any particular master. He kept contact with Polish artists in Paris, such as Slewinski, and with Mucha, but developed his pastel style independently from the influence of other artists. Perhaps Degas is the closest to his portrait-style. The strong, flexible but very refined and soft line of his work has a pulsating organic character and lives in delicate symbiosis with atmospherically vivid colouring. All attempts to find exact models and patterns for his style have failed, and one can only point to the general influence of Art Nouveau, Japonism or Degas's pastels.³⁶

As with the Hungarian Rippl-Rónai, Wyspianski was an artist determined to be himself, and capable of developing a unique personal style, while choosing specifically Polish subject matter. He was in fact even more committed as a dramatist than as a painter. The early stained glass window

³⁵ See: *Impressionismus und Symbolismus. Malerei der Jahrhundertwende aus Polen*. Catalogue (Baden-Baden, 1998), 189–91.

³⁶ Wyspianski wrote 17 dramas, several poems and made hundreds of pastel portraits of Cracow society, mainly of artists. See: *ibid.*, 205–6.

designs that he sent home to Cracow from Paris already show a major artistic personality with a clear inclination towards Expressionism. Paris may have speeded up the artist's ripening process, but it was only a catalyst for what was already there. Wyspianski was also an exceedingly learned man with a deep knowledge of antiquity, having studied literature and art history at the Jagiello University in Cracow. He offered a new, tragic vision of the glorious Polish past, which was Expressionist in its emotional intensity and reminiscent of the medieval Dance of Death. This was combined with a bitterly ironic depiction of contemporary Cracow society, characterized by empty daydreams and grotesque narcissism.

The Hungarian aspect

The first significant influence of a French master on the Hungarians was that of Bastien-Lepage and his version of plein-air naturalism mentioned earlier. István Csók, Béla Iványi Grünwald, István Réti, Károly Ferenczy and the young János Vaszary all painted their first mature works in this style, which Ferenczy called 'fine naturalism'.³⁷

What was the special appeal of this refined, gentle version of realism that the Hungarians preferred to most other stylistic trends they could become familiar with in the late 1880s? The answer could lie in a special affinity which originated in the spiritual-intellectual milieu from which they came and which had parallels in Scandinavian, especially Swedish, art. Most of these young Hungarian artists were brought up in the countryside and although they came from the middle class, their habits and their mental outlook were shaped by the world of rural Hungary. Their earliest and deepest emotional experiences were still deeply influenced by intimate experience of the cyclical rhythm of nature. Their strong patriotism was nourished by Hungarian literature which, up to the early nineties, focused on rural life, on life in the provinces on the estates, and was expressed with a gentle, poetical realism that idealized peasant life. This cultural climate made the style of the French realist painters, who focused on rural life in a similar way, especially appealing.

The Hungarians were still burdened by the national romantic imperative that required them to express the cultural specificity of their own nation. Lacking experience of the alienated metropolitan life (their urban experience was limited to sleepy, traditional provincial towns and an artistic, lovely, pre-industrial Munich) they perceived the urban subjects of the metropolis as fundamentally alien to them. Though thrilled by the experience of Paris, they did not think that certain aspects of its styles were transferable to their native land. Nevertheless they definitely wanted to modernize Hungarian

³⁷ See: *Seele und Farbe*. Catalogue (Vienna, 1999), 10–14.

culture (and art); to confront the artistic ideals of their fathers' generation with modern life, but to them modern reality was the life of the rural province, the existential problems of people living there, their longings, dreams, frustrations and their failures.

The tradition going back to Millet, continued by Jules Breton, Bastien-Lepage and Dagnan-Bouveret, approximated most closely to the artistic ideals of the Hungarians, who were brought up in the Munich academic tradition, venerating a highly finished, precise and polished modelling, similar to those of the old masters. These French masters focused also on contemporary life in the provinces and thus suggested an appropriate way of handling delicate psychological issues which provincial existence raised in the late 1880s. It was not so much the optical experimentation with fleeting phenomena, more the depicting of emotional realism of the state of the mind, or the marginal moments of fleeting moods of the souls of simple, humble people, which were the most important and the most modern tasks for these artists, as exemplified by István Csók's painting of 1891, *The Orphans*.

Paintings of this segment of the non-metropolitan world of France were very popular in the contemporary Parisian art world too and were not only officially acknowledged with prizes and medals in the Salon, but even the progressive art critics welcomed them. This poetical realism informed by reverence for the 'rootedness' of rural people and the traditional values of peasant life was precisely the attitude which young, patriotic painters coming from the margins of Europe could recognize as a reflection of their own ideals. The artistic stance of this branch of French modernism was the best model for mapping contemporary life in their homeland.

A modern, psychological realism (subdued, refined, elegiac without pathos) which the best contemporary literature also offered, was their ideal. In this ideal the concentration on human issues, on people, had priority over issues of craftsmanship, though, even if it is a simplification to divide these two aspects of the same creative process. For most Hungarian painters, as for the Poles and Czechs throughout the 1890s, the psychological states of human beings supplied the most important themes in art; that is why painters in Central Europe were more interested in symbolism and in fine realism than in the techniques and styles of late Impressionism.

All these painters studied for periods of varying length at the Académie Julian in the late 1880s or early 1890s. To analyse their individual careers in detail is beyond the scope of this article, so I will focus instead on the formative years of another Hungarian painter already mentioned, József Rippl-Rónai (1862–1926).³⁸

There were only a few Central European painters who spent not only their

³⁸ See: *Rippl-Rónai József*. Catalogue. National Gallery (Budapest, 1998).

formative years in Paris, but also tried to establish themselves within the artistic life of the world capital of the arts. One of them was Rippl-Rónai, who studied first for three years under Caspar Herterich and Wilhelm von Diez at the Munich Academy, then settled in Paris in March 1887. He was immediately accepted by Mihály Munkácsy, the famous realist painter, as his assistant. The young Rippl worked at first in the style of his master, but at the same time began to get acquainted with modern trends in art. Most probably it was the Fine Art Exhibition at the Paris World Exhibition of 1889 (and specifically the Symbolist and Synthetist works exhibited in the Café Volpini) which inspired him to make an abrupt break with Munkácsy. A letter to his mother in that year analyses his situation perceptively and shows a self-confident awareness of his own individual talent: 'Only that person can claim to have the rank of a great master whose talent manifests itself in such a form and in such a style which is unlike anybody else's. This is so difficult that even the greatest geniuses achieve it only in their forties and fifties.'

Rippl was single-minded about becoming a great painter. He began to study feverishly and to visit innumerable exhibitions in order to absorb different approaches and styles, but always with the aim, not only of learning from them, but of developing something different. His contemporary ideals were Manet, Puvis de Chavannes and Degas, but he was also mesmerized by the art of Whistler, while (according to his memoirs) the greatest impression of all was made on him by the work of Gauguin. Despite this, it is hard to trace Gauguin's influence in his work of the early 1890s. It is much more Besnard, Carrière, Odilon Redon and Whistler whose moods and mannerisms seem to be an identifiable inspiration for his portraits, which nevertheless show a strongly individual artistic personality. Rippl had his first great success with a picture entitled *My Grandmother* shown in the *Salon du Champ de Mars* in 1894, and this success brought him new friends and allies in the art world, such as the Nabis (Vuillard, Bonnard, Maurice Denis), and even Maillol. He was briefly integrated into the Parisian avant-garde of the 1890s through the circle of the *Revue Blanche*, but he could not repeat his early success and began to feel more and more frustrated in the French capital.

A creative crisis at the end of the 1890s and growing homesickness brought about his decision in 1900 to move back to his hometown of Kaposvár in provincial Hungary. His exhibitions in Budapest were at the beginning total failures and it was only in 1906 that he finally achieved success. His style, which went through different metamorphoses after he resettled in Hungary, became a kind of decorative Post/Impressionism with Fauve features. In his last years he practised a lyrical, pastel portraiture featuring sensitive characterizations of the human soul.

Rippl and his Nabi friends shared certain preferences with regard to subject matter and all of them liked to depict scenes of intimate family life,

primarily featuring the female members of the household – mothers, sisters, wives and mistresses. Their works can indeed aptly be described as *intimiste*.

Conclusion

The essential question of French influence on national art in the lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1890s is not 'why it happened', but rather: why was it so differently perceived by the artists of different Central European nations?

Apart from the accidental character of making contacts in the complicated art world of Paris, it is evident that the different nationalities were most inclined to pick up those trends which had something in common with some of the traditions that they had brought with them. This did not necessarily mean the adoption of formal stylistic peculiarities; it was more a question of a general outlook and a preoccupation with the human issues to which they could most easily relate, in view of their backgrounds. They were thus much more attracted to realism or symbolism than to impressionism. For them, art still had a serious social message, a didactic national function and a universal spiritual application, all of which had priority over the freedom of formal experimentation. Although most of them dreamed of making a career in Paris, even of becoming famous there, the majority were more concerned with bringing their acquired knowledge back to their homelands. According to the individual's temperament, character and intellectual openness, they absorbed different influences which can be illuminated in terms of styles, or (more revealingly) by comparing them with the artists whose mannerisms they occasionally adopted. Some pairings of this nature can be tentatively suggested: Grasset and Mucha; Slevinsky with Gauguin or Degas; Marold and Cheret; Rippl-Rónai with Odilon Redon and Carrière; Wyspianski and Lautrecand, possibly, Degas.

One general conclusion may be drawn from this overview, namely that no artist was content simply to acquire the exact style of an admired master. All of them tried to create something entirely new: not an amalgam, but a new chemistry of diverse elements that produced something unique. Of course they did assimilate new techniques, new colour schemes and the rest; but these were the means to an end, namely to use the French masters as a point of departure, not simply as a normative standard. This was, after all, an age of uncompromising subjectivity, where the glorification of the unique individual, who abolishes all existing rules of order, became the ultimate ideal. In this respect the artists were very different from the succeeding generation, the Central European Fauves, for whom a more objectively perceived world again became the ideal, with a correspondingly 'objective style' that was a common denominator across diverse individuals and avant-garde groupings. This meant that at first glance a Czech cubist painting or a

Hungarian Fauvist one will look more like its French contemporary equivalent than a turn of the century example of Central European art nouveau or symbolism. The earlier generation of artists represented the Modernism of their respective regions in a more autonomous way, by attempting to integrate experimental art with their local traditions and seeking to achieve a synthesis between quality, modernity and a localized *Weltanschauung*.